

Grazing Bites

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It's June. Am I the only one who feels like we lost a month somewhere? The longer-than-normal cooler spring has warped time a little. Forages in the last 14 to 21 days went from vegetative to seed heads. No, it's not your imagination, that was a bit early.

Not only was seed head production early, but the quantity of seed heads was also higher. Grass plants tend to react to stress factors by initiating their survival mode. This generally means they produce more seed. Cool season forages prefer cool, moist growing conditions. It has been a little cooler and while soil moisture conditions have varied quite a bit across the area, it's leaning more towards the drier side now, especially in some spots.



Forage growth has leaped forward big time. How do we keep it vegetative?

The real kicker this year, I believe, was late freezes. New spring growth was a little early this year and there was quite a bit of growth present, actually a lot in some locations, when temperatures dropped to below freezing. I was concerned about row crops that had been planted, fruit trees that were blooming, tender transplants in the garden, and heavy frost/freezes on forages. Cool season forages are pretty tolerable to frosts; freezing conditions can be a little more detrimental. I noticed light colored tips and even some whitening on orchardgrass. The plants quickly appeared to grow out of this with no ill effects, but I believe that the late freezes this year were the stress factor trigger that set the stage for earlier and heavier seed head production.

That push might not have been all bad. With drier weather conditions in many areas a lot more hay was cut this spring in a much timelier manner. This usually indicates higher quality hay. Depending on the severity of the earlier freezes and fertility, which is always a factor, yields for first cutting hay have been pretty good for the time frame.

I have always been a promoter of forage/pasture staging. What you really don't want to happen in a grazing system is all of your forage becoming mature at the same time. You really want to keep it as vegetative as possible for as long as possible. Years like this one make that extremely challenging. The fields that were "just" grazed are even trying to go to seed. Remember, the grass decided to go into survival mode just to be on the safe side. This is also where I have to ask myself sometimes, "does the grass know something that we don't?" I'll even go way out on a limb and say, could it possibly know what weather might lie ahead? Honestly, I don't think so, but it sure appears that way sometimes. Early maturity could conceivably be tied to future drier conditions, but that would be assuming a lot. The real topic at hand is how to manage this floodgate of maturing forage.

When forages are growing fast, move the animals likewise. When forages start slowing down, then the rotation can also slow down some. It is still important to keep the animals moving and never grazing closer than three to four inches whenever possible on cool season forages. When the floodgates are open though, you are usually better off top grazing. Top grazing is literally just that, allowing the animals to just graze off the very top one third or so of the plant. Certainly, less than "take half, leave half" and quite a reduction from stop grazing heights for sure. The normal goal should be to maintain as much pasture as possible in what I've referred to in the past as "stage two" growth - quality vegetative leafy growth prior to seed head production. We are past that now! We now just need to try and get forages back under some type of control. If this is not a problem for you and forage is short, then you actually have a bigger issue.

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For most people, the first reaction is cutting it for hay. This can be a viable option, but quite often gets way out of hand. I've seen a few people cut everything for hay. What are some of the ramifying factors of doing that? First, that is a lot of nutrients being removed and moved; ka ching; enough said on that. Second, if it turns dry, and it could, you will end up turning around and having to feed that to the livestock quicker and usually less efficiently than if it was just grazed.

You never want to feed hay when you can be grazing except when doing so will provide needed rest for the pasture or prevent overgrazing, such as during a drought. On a few rare occasions, I've seen people feeding hay while making hay with very puzzled looks on the cows faces. In that case, there are way too many wheels turning and I don't know how you pencil that out. If you know that a certain amount of forage is going to be needed to feed the herd, leave it and let the cows work for you more! They work for grass.

I'd much rather have a problem with too much grass than not enough grass. But as I mentioned earlier, I'd rather try and keep forages as vegetative as possible too. If you can't top graze fast enough, and that is certainly possible right now, then mechanical topping might be warranted to help keep it vegetative and growing.

If you find yourself in this situation, then top the last paddocks that were grazed with the bushhog to delay the urgency of needing to return to those a little longer. This slight topping and deferment will usually reap benefits as long as sufficient moisture is available and even help some if moisture is short.

Raise the mower up enough to, ideally, only remove stems and seed heads and very little leaf matter. Once leaf matter is removed, regrowth slows some because of the removal of good photosynthetic plant material. Removal of stems and seed heads should not be a large amount of material. Mowing deeper into the stand and laying down too much material not only removes some of that solar panel, but it also covers up a good bit of it, too. This slows regrowth and tillering; exactly what we want to promote.

If you can't mow it high enough then you have two choices; graze it or hay it. If you plan ahead and these runaway fields are ones that could use additional soil organic matter, improved soil health and/or nutrient cycling, then you are better off grazing them. Strip-grazing them is then the best scenario to achieve those goals, allocating out strips or small blocks of this forage using high stock density for a very short time frame. The livestock will eat the best and lay down and help re-set the rest. Grass that is "trampled down" is not wasted; it is mulch for moisture conservation and fertilizer for future growth. These fields are often some of the best stockpile for later use. This can be done even with mature forages that got skipped, but expect slightly less intake depending on the forages present.

Now, most producers do need some hay, and mowing it earlier rather than later means higher quality forage and probably more potential for increased regrowth. As any grass or legume plant matures, quality declines in terms of crude protein, energy and digestibility. Figure out how much hay you think you will really need for winter use and then stop. If you keep it vegetative, it is really not going anywhere. Grazing it is still the most efficient use of it and is usually the easiest on your bottom line. Remember, it's not about maximizing a grazing event, but maximizing a grazing season! Keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

Indiana Forage Council Grazing Schools – June 4-5 at SIPAC (Southern location), June 11-12 Rossville, IN (Northern location), Both sessions will be Friday 1-6 and Saturday 8-4:30. Attendees are being limited; register early. Southern school: <https://bit.ly/3g8zWRV> Northern school: <https://bit.ly/3ulnYlg> or call (812)678-4427.



National Grazing Conference – December 6-9, 2021, Myrtle Beach, SC. For more information go to: <https://www.grazinglands.org/grazing-conference/>

More pasture information and past issues of Grazing Bites are available at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/in/technical/landuse/pasture/>

